

High-standard schools scaring away whites

Perhaps you remember white flight.

That is, of course, the term for what happened in the '60s when blacks, newly liberated from legal segregation, began fanning out from the neighborhoods to which they'd once been restricted.

Traumatized at the thought of living in proximity to their perceived inferiors, white people put their houses on the market at fire-sale prices and took flight.

Well, something similar is happening now in Northern California. Similar in the sense of being completely different. Where whites once ran because they felt they were superior to their new neighbors, they are apparently running now because they feel they are not quite as good.

I refer you to a Nov. 19 story in *The Wall Street Journal*. Reporter Suein Hwang interviewed white parents who are pulling their kids out of elite public high schools, schools known for sending graduates to the nation's top colleges. They are doing this, writes Hwang, because the schools are too academically rigorous, too narrowly focused on subjects like math and science.

Too Asian.

Yes, you read right. Hwang reports that since 1995, the number of white students at Lynbrook High in San Jose has fallen by almost half. At Monta Vista High in Cupertino, white students now make up less than a third of the population.

White parents are putting their kids into private schools or moving to areas where the public schools are whiter, less Asian and less demanding. Where sports and music are also emphasized, and educators value, as one parent put it, "the whole child."

One white woman told Hwang how she dissuaded a young white couple from moving to town, telling them their child might be "the only Caucasian kid in the class." Another said, "It does help to have a lower Asian population."

Which plays, of course, into the old stereotype of the hyper-competitive Asian. But the new white flight has also given rise to a new stereotype one educator calls "the white boy syndrome." It says that white kids just don't have it between the ears.

The irony speaks for itself.

I have no idea why Asian kids tend to lap the field, academically speaking. I do know it has nothing to do with the simple fact of being Asian, any more than the fact of being black makes you a great basketball player.

To attain proficiency in any field, it helps to want that proficiency and to belong to a culture that rewards it. We strive for the things we deem important.

I make no argument for punishing, joyless education. Sports and music are important, too. On the other hand, most kids are hardly in danger of studying too hard or being insufficiently entertained.

Consider the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a federal study released last month. It found that despite some improvement, American kids remain academically underwhelming. Only 31 percent of fourth graders, for instance, were rated "proficient" or better in reading. Just 30 percent of eighth graders managed to hit that mark in math.

In recent years, I've taught writing at an elite public high school and three universities. And I've been appalled at how often I've encountered students who simply could not put a sentence together, had no conception of basic grammar and punctuation.

They tell me I'm a tough grader, and the funny thing is, I think of myself as a soft touch. "I've always gotten A's before," sniffed one girl to whom I thought I was being generous in awarding a C-plus.

It occurs to me that this is the fruit of our dumbing down education in the name of self-esteem. This is what we get for making the work easier instead of demanding that the students work harder — and the parents be more involved.

So this new white flight is less a surprise than a fresh disappointment. And I've got news for those white parents: They should be running in the opposite direction.



LEONARD
PITTS JR.

SYNDICATED
COLUMNIST

Reach Leonard Pitts Jr. at lpitts@herald.com.
THE MIAMI HERALD